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AUTHOR	Gerlicher, Cathie
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transition in research efforts that study women from the adult literacy policies and programs, through educational practices to leadership training directed specifically toward women. Literacy issues are continuing to focus on adult education, but are also expanding to the families as well. The most successful programs are those that offer an individualized, family-based approach that integrates literacy with job training. Not only do adult educational programs need to remain flexible for time, but they also need to provide the right training at a time when the adult learner is ready. Among the findings of research on women as adult learners are the following: students' desire to learn can be self-regulated; for returning women students, the sense of empowerment becomes a focus of their study; and students with clear goals are most likely to complete their studies. The research on women in training shows a direct correlation between education and training and wages earned. According to the research on women experiencing success, women can indeed play a key role in leadership positions, and training courses designed around women's leadership styles rather than traditional men's styles are especially effective. It was concluded that research directed toward learning about female students and what brings them on campus will make efforts to personalize their educational experience more feasible. (Contains 20 references.) (MN)

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Women in the Working World - From Welfare to Leadership

Cathie Gerlicher

ED 425 327

This paper will explore the transition in research efforts studying women from the adult literacy policies and programs, through educational practices, to leadership training directed specifically toward women. When we look at welfare demographics we find that aid to families with dependent children number the recipients in the 15 million range (US Department of Education, 1994). Many women use the welfare system for less than 2 years and are found to be of all races. One strong correlation found among people that use the welfare system is that they are lacking in the basic skills of reading and math. A key factor that arises due to this lack of skill is a result of low self-esteem and low personal expectations. This factor alone seems to be a common barrier among programs that work with success for women. We will examine here the effects of literacy skills.

Women and Literacy

The efforts of agencies to promote literacy have been directed through many outlets. For example, literacy programs in prisons have been a focus of the crime control act in 1990. They have found that four out of five inmates don't have their high school diploma and many lack basic skills. (Cohen, 1994). This is only one example of the many programs offered by agencies for adult literacy. In 1992 a survey was undertaken to learn more about how adult literacy programs were offered, administered, and the number of people that participated. Their findings were staggering. Nearly 2 million new adult clients enroll each year based on the findings from one group. The department of Education reports over 4 million in their adult education programs. They are funded through a variety of agencies and run by paid staff as well as volunteers (Cohen, 1994). Tracking success and job placement from these programs is difficult.

Literacy issues are continuing to focus on adult education, but also are expanding to the families as well. Programs such as Head Start, teen parent programs, and single parent programs are some of the efforts being made to help promote not only literacy, but also raising the personal expectations for the people in these programs. The most successful programs are those that offer an individualized, family based approach that integrates literacy with job training. It seems that one way to eliminate welfare is to promote literacy and to train for family wage jobs.

One program that was created by the United Nations Development Program was to make materials to "help empower women" (Aksornkool, 1997). Within this program, materials were offered that were gender sensitive and geared to examining attitudes and values. By creating an awareness of values these women could learn new ways out of poverty. One of the barriers to poverty is the time factor. Poor women have less time to pursue educational activities. Their problems and life events take much more time than that of the more middle class population (Aksornkool, 1997). School and education training activities should be designed around this need.

Women as Adult Learners

Not only do adult educational programs need to remain flexible for time, but they also need to provide the right training at a time when the adult learner is ready. Generally the typical adult student is motivated when she arrives for training programs. Studies have been done on motivation and the way each student's desire to learn can be self-regulated. In one study (Wolters, 1998) several students

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were surveyed on how they regulate their own motivation. Or, what other techniques these students used in order to be successful. The findings discussed that students who were in control of their cognitive processes or in control of ways to help insure their success in class were not only more successful, but had higher self-efficacy. Not all students achieve that high level of motivation however.

Teaching or promoting motivation can come in many forms within the foundations of a community college. One very effective method that colleges use is that of the cooperative work experience or service learning. These programs can be integrated into the classroom experience as well as in the college experience depending on the way it is structured. In a recent study (Astin, 1998) the effect of participation in volunteer service programs was reviewed. The findings showed that students who made a connection to the community enhanced not only their academic development but also created a sense of civic responsibility.

This success can be tied together by realizing that older women students have different needs and interests when they seek training to return to the job market. One interesting note to attracting these women came from a study done in the UK. This article (Jeynes,1991) noticed that women attracted to the work place, who had been away for an extended time, did not value their own skills and could not recognize the new skills they had learned through life experience. The women tended to look at their skills as though no changes had occurred in their lives and as if they were as unskilled as they were from high school. This goes back to the studies about adult learners and building their personal confidence. Women many times lack confidence, but they can find success in the school setting. Another interesting article (Cross, 1997) talks about classroom assessment techniques that propose to upgrade the educational process for success in the 21st century. Employers are demanding that workers be able to read, think, and solve problems. The educational curriculum has not changed over the years, but the work force has. As educational reform works its way into the classroom and to the work place, women may find this change an opportunity for educational advancement.

One particular study (Karen, 1990) looked at interrelationships in returning women students. Karen's study and methodology was to allow women's "voices" to be heard and to understand their stories. Through listening and gathering stories, the life histories of several women were collected. The sense of empowering them for their lives became the focus of the study and the focus that allowed the women to appreciate their lives and to build on their personal successes. There are several other pertinent articles that focus on hearing women talk about their stories and helping them discover the value of their lives and the ways they, too, can be successful (Nugent, 1993) and (Tarule, 1988). All of these articles studied the process of women's gaining an understanding of who they were and to learn how to be more successful in the educational environment.

All of the articles I have reviewed tie into motivation, creating ties to the community, and success in the classes. High self-esteem can help students move successfully through the college programs. There is not a great deal of literature specifically on the adult woman learner. A study by (Flannery & Hayes, 1995) shows summaries of various studies done about women and indicates the limitations of the literature. There is room for further study of older women in schools. They are quickly becoming the traditional students and colleges need to be prepared to meet their needs.

Throughout my research I also read several articles on student retention. These articles (Rifenbary, 1995), (Mohammadi, 1994), and (Price, 1993) all focused their research on how to retain the "non-traditional" student. One common conclusion that I found among all of the articles is that students who have clear goals are the ones that can make it through the system. Each author defined the students and found the dropouts to be a majority of older women. As we learn more about these students and learn how to capture their interest and help develop clear goals at the beginning of their

experience, the better chance the colleges have of keeping them.

Women in Training

As these older women progress through education and seek employment, the training offerings change and different job opportunities can arise. Literature is showing a direct correlation between education and training to wages earned (Eck, 1993), (Burghardt & Gordon, 1990). Women typically enter into women's jobs (i.e. secretary, aid, etc) that are generally the lowest paying. Women in these fields are seldom offered training opportunities to advance within the organization. As we look at the profile of these older women, we find generalizations that many midlife women fit into (Women's Bureau Department of Labor, 1993). Many times they are stuck in moderate paying jobs with little or no chance of moving up. They are rarely covered in retirement plans and are very close to the poverty line. Any disruption in their lives can drastically affect them.

This group of women is under the attention of the Department of Labor, which is looking to fund training to help them. Their success again can be related to the goals of saving the family. These women typically in the 35 to 54 year old age range have a great deal of influence on the success of their families as well as on their own personal success.

Networking has become an important focus on some of the job search strategies we see today. According to this article, (Drentea, 1998) women tend to network with other women usually in the same job level as they are. If women are going to use networking as a strategy, then part of training needs to teach about drawing support from more aspects of the community. This networking is another good reason for cooperative work experience and setting clear goals from the outset of the training experience.

Women Experiencing Success

Women can play a key role in leadership positions. They can be leaders without following the format that men use (Schmitt, 1995). In a study about teaching leadership to women, (Schmitt, 1995) the author surveyed women who had taken a training course designed around women's leadership styles rather than traditional men's styles. The survey information showed that the women who went through the program were successful educational leaders and they felt their training was effective.

As women move up the career ladders we are continuing to notice an interesting phenomenon of women's fear of success (Rountree & Frusher, 1991). Without a large pool of role models for women to choose from, the fear of personal success has become an issue to learn more about. It seems that this quest for success leads back to the beginning: setting clear goals, broadening their network, and learning to value one's own story.

Conclusion

Solving welfare seems to be an overwhelming goal that might never be achieved. We can only appreciate and continue to support the programs that save a few lives at a time and that open new opportunities for those who are ready. Success requires strong motivation, strong leadership, and the ability for the college to recognize the needs of the women who enter. When we spend time learning about our students and what brings them on campus, then perhaps our efforts to personalize their educational experience will be more feasible. We still continue to expect our traditional students to be 18 – 20 years old middle-class kids. The students are no longer that age nor just middle class. As we serve our community, we serve them all.

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